

Libyan elections postponed amid mounting violence

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Libya's ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) has postponed elections scheduled for June 19 amid continuing militia clashes, kidnappings and arrests. The elections are unlikely to be held before mid-July at the earliest.

On Wednesday, the US Consulate in Benghazi came under bomb and grenade attack, although no one was injured. It was reportedly in retaliation for the killing of Libyan-born cleric Abu Yahya al-Libi by a US drone strike in Pakistan hours before.

Earlier in the week, a brigade of al-Afwiya militiamen briefly took over the capital's international airport in Tripoli and grounded all flights to pressure the NTC to release their leader, Abu Ajila al-Habshi.

The al-Afwiya is only one of more than 500 "rebel" armed outfits that fought Gaddafi's forces. During the NATO war, they seized different parts of Libya and its vital and most lucrative infrastructure and funds and set up checkpoints along the major highways. Many of these rival gangs have yet to disband or be integrated into the national army, itself little more than another militia. There have been constant reports of fighting between these armed groups as they carve up Libya's towns and cities into "zones of influence."

The continuation of these conflicts exposes as a lie the justification for the NATO-led war for regime-change—that it would bring democracy and human rights. Rather than "liberation", the country faces violent break-up and civil war.

The elections, when and if they are held, will themselves be a travesty of democracy. They will choose a 200-seat constituent assembly whose primary task is to draft a new constitution, which is then to be put to a referendum. Electoral legislation states that only those with a "professional qualification" can stand as a candidate, making it impossible for workers to stand. Virtually everyone who worked at any level in Gaddafi's government is also barred, unless they can demonstrate "early and clear support for the February 17th revolution."

The interim government has also introduced controversial new laws making it a crime to glorify the former regime or "insult the aims of the February 17 revolution."

Taken together, the laws restrict candidature to a relatively small number, and even these are subject to approval by the Electoral Commission.

The postponement of the vote has elicited little comment from the Western powers. Their real intention in Libya was to install a pliant administration that would enable them to secure control of the country's lucrative oil reserves, bolster their geo-strategic position in North Africa, and increase their penetration of the entire African continent. To this end, they

gave their backing to the NTC—an amalgam of former regime stalwarts, CIA assets and Islamic fundamentalists.

Having assumed power, the NTC has little credibility and its control over the country remains fragile. It has been forced to outsource security and the criminal justice system to various militia groups which, according to a United Nations report last January, are holding more than 7,000 detainees. International human rights groups have accused some of these groups of gross human rights abuses against their prisoners.

The Berber tribes in the west of the country have complained of official indifference and neglect by the NTC. In March, tribal fighting broke out in the south of the country, killing at least 150 people. Armed gangs are fighting for control of the smuggling routes into Chad and Sudan, leaving hundreds dead. Clashes around Tripoli have frequently led to closures of the border with Tunisia. Last month, an armed gang broke into the prime minister's office demanding back pay.

As the US Consulate bombing makes clear, even in Benghazi, the centre of the uprising against Gaddafi, the situation is unstable. Construction in the city is at a standstill since almost all of Libya's 3.5 million foreign workers left last year. Unemployment is rife and those jobs that remain go to lower paid migrant workers from Bangladesh and Sudan.

The interim government set up the Supreme Security Committee (SSC) under the Interior Ministry to take control of security from the militia. The SSC says that 32,000 of Gaddafi's 88,000-strong police force have returned to work, providing the bulk of some 50,000 men it claims it can field. A further 28,000 are in training, including some 13,000 in Jordan.

The NTC was able to take control of the international airport in Tripoli from a Zintan Brigade only in April. It has also wrested control of the inner-city airport Benita from Souq al-Juma, which had been "guarding" the airport since August last year. But at Benghazi airport the insignia of the Free Libya Martyrs Brigade is still displayed.

When the ministry tried to deploy SSC units it provoked the ire of the most powerful armed forces in the country, the militias controlling Misrata and Zintan. Their city councils insisted that the militia should be under regional control.

The brigades fear that they will lose their income under a national security regime, under conditions where the NTC is recruiting from the old regime and handing out security contracts to private companies from the NATO countries that toppled Gaddafi. Britain's Aegis, which made huge profits from its post-Iraq War contracts, is seeking \$5 billion to police Libya's borders.

While UN representative Ian Martin told the Security Council last month that SSC had registered 60,000 to 70,000 militiamen, he voiced concerns, saying, "It was essential, however, that the committee not become a parallel security."

The *Guardian* cited a horrific example of surgeon Salem Forjani, who was sent to Tripoli's main medical centre by the health minister to remove the hospital director, who was accused of misusing public funds and having close links to the Gaddafi regime. Forjani was kidnapped, detained and tortured by the SSC. After five days, he was released without charge. The health minister could get no explanation from the NTC. The NTC neither arrested the kidnappers nor launched an investigation as the minister requested.

Last month, Amnesty International cited the case of 20 detainees who were stripped and beaten repeatedly until they became unconscious, then revived and beaten again in Ain Zara Prison. They were left for two days on a concrete floor without mattresses or blankets.

The NTC has expanded from 9 to 86 members, but no one even knows who they are or how they are appointed. Its meetings are held in secret, its votes are not published, and its decisions are announced only irregularly on television broadcasts. No one knows how the estimated monthly oil revenues of \$5 billion or the \$200 billion of Libyan investments are dispersed.

NATO's war on the Gaddafi regime was only the herald of a US offensive to bring Africa under its control. Immediately after Gaddafi's lynching, the US announced it was sending troops to four more African countries—the Central African Republic, Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. AFRICOM, the US military's African command, is set to carry out 14 major joint military exercises in African countries in 2012, an unprecedented number.

This could not have been achieved without Gaddafi's ouster. Gaddafi was an obstacle to US penetration of Africa. He wielded considerable influence through the African Union (AU), playing a major role in establishing it in the 1990s, serving as its biggest donor and chairing the organization in 2009-10. Libya also provided about \$150 billion of investments in Africa and had proposed an African Union Development Bank that would have reduced Africa's financial dependence on the West.

Because of Gaddafi, who offered cash and investment to African governments, the US was unable to find a headquarters for AFRICOM in Africa and had to base it in Stuttgart, Germany. Now the AU is being lined up to carry out Washington's colonial ventures, as its forces are integrated with AFRICOM.

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